

## All The Leaves Are Brown (And the sky is gray)

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## All The Leaves Are Brown (And the sky is gray)

by [AvocadoLove](#)

### Summary

The Winter Soldier's mission is nearly complete. Howard and Maria Stark are dead, leaving him to dispatch their four-year-old child. One quick twist of the neck is all it will take, but the Soldier finds he cannot do it.

So instead of killing Tony Stark, the Winter Soldier takes him away to raise as his own.

### Notes

This story is complete on the k\_m and based on elements of these two great prompts:  
<http://avengerkink.livejournal.com/18271.html?thread=43519327#t43519327>  
<http://avengerkink.livejournal.com/19023.html?thread=43613775#t43613775>

**Trigger warnings** for implied previous child abuse, Stockholm syndrome, and

contemplation of suicide (nothing heavy -- in a later chapter Bucky makes plans to kill himself should Hydra ever nab him again).

If you like this fic, definitely check out [A Walk on a Winter's Day](#) which is a great continuation by Bluandorange.

Finally, the Winter Soldier's dialog is a little... stiff in the first couple of chapters. That's intentional. He'll get better. :)

# Chapter 1

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All the leaves are brown, and the sky is gray. I went for a walk on a winter's day...

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Gravel crunches under the tires of the Rolls Royce as it trundles up the country road. The Winter Soldier peers through the scope and adjusts his grip, his finger ghosting over the trigger. He's been in position for hours, has watched his targets for over two weeks before this. He knows their routine.

This is the first day of a long weekend in the Stark Family country estate. No one will think to look for them until at least Monday.

The Soldier takes careful aim. If he misses, he will have to eliminate his targets individually. This is much cleaner.

He fires.

With the silencer, the shot is noiseless, but the blown tire is not. The expensive Rolls Royce had been on the final turn before a wide country driveway. It skids onto the soft shoulder, and flips on its side to slide down a steep ravine.

Carefully, the Soldier stows his rifle and makes his way down the slope, dragging piles of dry brush behind him. No one will see the wreckage from the roadway.

The Rolls Royce has rolled twice before fetching up against an oak tree at the bottom of the ravine. The Soldier sees that the woman has been ejected from her seat. Maria Stark. She is dead. He mentally crosses her off his list.

Ripping away the car door from its hinges, he peers inside.

Howard Stark has a trickle of blood coming from the corner of his mouth. His breathing is wet and ragged. He's stirring weakly, perhaps alerted by his four-year-old child who is screaming from the back seat.

Howard Stark opens his eyes and looks at the Soldier. There is no anger or fear in his gaze -- but something else. Something that gives the Soldier pause. This is not an expression he has seen from his targets before.

"Bucky," the man rasps. His hands claw weakly at his seatbelt, but his gaze is unfocused and vague. Dying. "Get Tony... Take care of my son."

The name rattles around in the Soldier's head for a few moments without purchase.

Howard takes a rattling breath, then shudders. He dies with his eyes half open.

The child is still crying, tear tracks running down his face. But he seems unhurt, and is unbuckling himself from his baby car seat with surprising dexterity.

The Soldier captures him just as he manages to free himself, and hauls the boy out of the car. His metal hand clamps over the boy's mouth and nose. The boy goes silent, his eyes big and terrified and staring.

One twitch to break the neck is all it will take.

In the Soldier's pocket is a lighter -- the authorities will assume the fire sparked from the car crash and caught dry brush. The flames will cleanse all evidence he was here.

*Bucky... Take care of my son.*

*Finish the assignment*, the Soldier thinks.

*Bucky, take care of my son.*

*Bucky...*

The Soldier drops his hand. The child screams, wriggles, and tries to bite him, but the Soldier has fought much stronger foes. Screams do not bother him. He holds Tony under one arm and starts the fire with the other. Then he turns and walks into the forest.

By the time they are a quarter mile away, the child has exhausted himself into tired whimpers.

The Soldier stops and adjusts the child to carry him on one hip.

The mission is finished. He must return to the rendezvous point.

*Why? Why should I?*

The Soldier stops in place, shakes his head. This second thought rattles around where before there had been only silence. Only the mission.

He moves on, but... where is he going?

He cannot return until he finishes his assignment. The boy is alive. His work is not complete. He will be expected to *end* him.

It's only then he realizes he doesn't want to.

He stops again. "Tony."

The word is odd in his mouth -- he isn't used to speaking other than to confirm his orders.

The boy stirs at the sound of his name. The Soldier places his hand on the back of the boy's neck, not to kill this time. He does not know why he does it, only that Tony snuffles at the touch.

"I want Jarvis," the boy whimpers.

"You are safe now," the Soldier says.

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The Soldier owns no car, no transportation. He hiked into these hills and so he hikes out of them.

By now the fire has grown, and the fire department has been called. Tony perks up at the sound of sirens. The Soldier stops and turns the boy's head so he looks him in the eye.

"Keep quiet. If you scream, someone may hear, and then you will die."

Perhaps another child as young would not understand the concept of death, but he feels Tony tremble at his words.

"But... firemen are good guys."

The Soldier tilts his head and chooses his words carefully. "There are bad men everywhere."

He does not mention he is one of them.

Tony begins to cry again, but quietly.

The Soldier continues in the general direction of the closest town.

He forgets himself several times, and begins to return to the rendezvous point twice, three times, before he remembers he cannot.

*No, the child should live. Tony. Bucky. Keep my son safe.*

It helps that Tony periodically rouses enough to fight him. "Let me go! No! No! I want down. I want to go home!"

The Soldier stops every time, easily restraining the child and clamping a hand over his mouth until he exhausts himself and quiets. Then the Soldier moves on.

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There is a small motel on the outskirts of town. The Soldier rents a room for the night using the petty cash given at the start of the mission, and sets the child down. Tony immediately skitters away, hiding under one of the desk chairs. There are several finger-sized bruises on his skinny arms.

The Soldier knows his own strength and the nature of injuries. He has not been restraining him long enough for bruises to form. He did not cause these.

Then he realizes the child has not been crying for his mom and dad. It bothers the Soldier, but only in that any signs of abuse will cause unwanted attention to himself.

The words are foreign in his mouth and slow to come. "Are you... hungry?"

Tony stares at him, wide-eyed and frightened.

"Thirsty?" the Soldier asks.

The boy nods.

There is an old plastic cup by the sink. The Soldier fills it and sets it beside Tony, leaning back. The boy snatches the cup and drinks greedily.

"Slow," the Soldier says. "You will make yourself sick."

The boy doesn't slow, and gulps it all down. As the Soldier said, he is soon sick.

The Soldier takes him to the bathroom and washes him the best he can.

"Where's Mommy and Daddy?" Tony asks, shivering under a cold shower spray. "Are they still in the car?"

"Yes."

"Then how will they know I'm here?"

"They know." This is the truth. The dead know everything.

"Can I go home?" Tony asks.

The Soldier says nothing, only hangs the boy's shirt to dry on the shower curtain rod.

Eventually Tony starts to cry again -- hiccupping, exhausted tears. The Soldier puts him to bed and sits with him until he quiets into sleep.

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The next day, the Soldier steals a car from the business next door. In the parking lot, Tony tries to bolt from him. He is easily caught.

Tony shrieks and stabs at the Soldier with a pen he'd taken apart and remade into a sharp object.

He is quite intelligent, not only to make an improvised weapon, but to keep it out of the Soldier's notice until now. The Soldier admires it for a moment before he tosses it away.

Then he belts a struggling Tony into the back seat, ties his ankles together with his own shoelaces, and drives away.

Through the day, Tony's rebellion develops into full blown tantrums.

"I wanna go home! Take me home now! I WANT JARVIS!" he screams, beating his fists on the back of the Soldier's seat. "Now! Now! Now! NOW!"

But the Soldier is unmoved, and after several hours Tony drops into sullen silence.

They stick to the back roads.

By the third day the boy must realize his questions about his parents whereabouts won't be

answered. Nor will the Soldier say where they are going (he doesn't know -- only away). It doesn't stop him from asking about anything and everything.

"Why do we change cars every day? How come you wear a glove on one hand? Can we eat? I'm hungry. I want hamburgers. Can I see Jarvis now? When are we stopping? Why do you have makeup under your eyes? I need to tinkle. Can we stop? Why are we driving, wouldn't taking the jet be faster?"

Finally the Soldier says, "There are bad people following us. We must get away from them and keep out of sight. I'm keeping you safe."

"What's your name?" Tony shoots back.

"Bucky."

The word slips out, unbidden, and startling him so badly he nearly yanks the car off the road.

Tony starts to cry again, fearful, perhaps, of being in another car accident.

The Soldier clutches the steering wheel so hard the metal arm dents it. His heart is thundering in his chest and he doesn't know why.

## Chapter 2

For the first time, the Soldier begins to wonder how he acquired the skills he possesses.

He remembers waking up and being told the parameters of the mission, and who his targets are. He was never told how to keep out of sight, or given the knowledge that he must only steal a little from each place, to regularly switch vehicles, keep changing locations, sleep in the day and travel at night, how to pick locks, which foods are best for breakfast, lunch, and dinner... Any number of a thousand things he knows.

There have been only the missions. But watching Tony learn and ask questions, the Soldier wonders how he came about these skills himself. Surely, he was once a boy as well.

He remembers nothing.

By the time a week has passed, the Tony is acting probably normally for himself -- the normal Tony Stark is loud. His magpie chatter streams out from the back of the car. It fills the empty gaps in the Soldier's mind where there was only the silence of the mission, and reminds the Soldier that he cannot go back.

Sometimes the urge to return, report the mission failed, is so strong he can taste it in the back of his throat. Choking him. The Soldier pulls off the side of the road until it passes.

One day, he dares not drive at all for fear his body will take him back.

They will kill Tony.

Most likely, they will have him do it.

The motel they stay in rents by the hour, so the Soldier pays for 24. There is a donation box for disadvantaged children sitting on a street corner two blocks away. The Soldier breaks into it and removes a small stack of age-appropriate books and one toy robot.

"Little Golden Books?" Tony repeats. "These are for babies. I'm four years, two months and fifteen days... I'm not a baby!"

"Read them," the Soldier says, leaning back. He knows -- though he doesn't know how -- that he is overdue to report. His superiors are calling him in. Everything in him screams to return... but he must not. "Read them aloud."

Tony scowls, but picks up the first book off the pile. He is wary enough of the Soldier to follow his orders.

He begins to read -- fast, as if to prove his point that he can.

The Soldier closes his eyes and lets the sound of the child's voice wash over him, driving out the silence.

Eventually Tony stutters to a halt, caught on a word he doesn't know.



The Soldier opens his eyes to see Tony's cheeks flame red as he tries to sound the word out. The boy gives up and glares at him.

"I'm not stupid!" he says hotly.

"You're not," the Soldier agrees. Few children at four can read, and not to this level. He leans over and Tony tenses almost as if readying himself for a strike. The Soldier taps a finger of his gloved, metal hand under the problem word. "Somersault," he says, then leans back.

Tony glances at the page, at him, then back again and starts to read -- a little slower this time.

After a few hours, the worst of the urge to return has receded.

The Soldier gives Tony the robot toy. The child takes it with a dubious expression, then spends several hours taking it apart, using a modified plastic fork as a screwdriver.

The Soldier looks at the pieces and frowns. "Didn't you like it?"

"I want to make it better," Tony says, screwing up his face while removing a leg of the toy. "It's really boring now, but I can fix it."

The Soldier nods and it earns a tiny smile. Tony's first, toward him.

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Tony has not tried to run away from him in two days, but the Soldier does not tempt fate. He does not dare leave him alone, and takes the boy shopping for groceries in a small, dusty store on the outskirts of El Paso, Texas.

The woman at the checkout smiles down at Tony as she bags their goods. "He looks old enough to start school this year," she says to the Soldier. "My daughter teaches kindergarten up the street. Your son will be in good hands."

Tony wiggles impatiently. "He's not my d--"

The Soldier touches the back of Tony's neck in warning. The boy stops, cringing away. Luckily, the woman is distracted counting out their change from the till.

That night, the Soldier begins to teach Tony in basic Russian. It will serve the dual purpose of keeping the boy's active mind occupied, and will allow the Soldier to communicate freely with him, if need be.

Tony soaks the language up like a sponge. Teaching him, too, fills the silence in the Soldier's head.

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The Soldier turns on the radio only when he is certain Tony is asleep. He listens to reports out of upstate New York of the tragic death of the semi-famous Stark family. These reports evolve as

officials realize there are two bodies in the burned wreckage, not three.

Little Tony Stark is presumed to have survived the car wreck that killed his parents, and is possibly lost in the nearby woods.

Soon, a state-wide search and rescue operation is underway.

The Soldier knows eventually the focus will shift to an abduction case, if it hasn't already. He and Tony must be clear of the country well before then.

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"Drink your juice," the Soldier says.

Tony takes a swallow and wrinkles his nose. "It tastes funny."

The Soldier repeats the phrase in Russian, and refuses to acknowledge Tony until the boy speaks the words back to him. He's learned Tony cannot stand to be ignored. It is a useful tool to get him to behave.

"It's grape juice," the Soldier says in answer, and pushes Tony to take another gulp. "Makes little boys grow strong."

"I'm not little!" Tony protests (in Russian, the Soldier notes), but he finishes the rest anyway.

Twenty minutes later, Tony's loose limbed and asleep on an old, dusty couch. The Soldier checks his pulse and respiration. Satisfied, he packs away the bottle of cough syrup he used to spike the juice, then carefully bundles the boy up.

He cannot afford another near miss like in El Paso.

He purchases the remainder of the supplies they will need in one afternoon. No one looks twice at the exhausted, napping boy in the shopping cart.

Their journey will take nearly a week, and most will be on foot.

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The next evening, the Soldier parks the car on the steep edge of an arroyo. He orders Tony out, carefully unpacks their supplies, then takes off the parking brake and rolls the vehicle into the dry wash. The next rain will sweep it away.

"Carry this." The Soldier hands a child sized backpack to him.

Tony stares at it, then out to the open desert vista -- all orange and tan and bone dry. "Are we going to see Jarvis now?" he asks, half-heartedly. He knows the Soldier will not answer any question about his family or his former butler. He asks less and less frequently.

"No English," the Soldier replies. "You may ask in Russian only."

Tony huffs out a long, irritated sigh, but follows behind when the Soldier hoists his much larger pack and sets off down the slope.

"Where are we going?" Tony asks several minutes later, in Russian. His accent is improving, too.

"Monterrey."

"Why?"

He considers. Up until now he has not indulged many of Tony's questions. But in the desert, there is no one around to listen. "It is the capital of Nuevo León, and has a large enough population to hide us. The government is corrupt, and officials are easy to bribe."

"Why?" Tony asks again.

"Because we are being chased by people who wish to do us harm."

Tony looks around, almost as if expecting someone to leap at him out of the scrub-brush. He quickens his step, following at the Soldier's heels.

"Is that why our car crashed?"

The Soldier supposes Tony's speaking of the mission that killed his parents. "Yes," he says honestly. "These men... they will not think twice of killing a boy such as yourself." Which is also the truth. The Soldier had nearly done it himself.

Tony's eyes widen. He looks so fearful for a moment that the Soldier rests a hand on his narrow shoulder. He does not know why he does it.

"The journey will be hard and dangerous," he says, looking down at the boy, "but I will be with you every step of the way."

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U.S. Border Patrol agents are used to looking for migrants traveling into Mexico, not the other way around. The Soldier and Tony are not intercepted.

The way is familiar. The Soldier knows he has taken it before to escape the country, though he can't remember when it was... and why can't he? His other missions are blank to him, though he knows he's had them.

Who was he, before?

Once Tony gets over his fears, crossing the desert is an adventure to him. He has a question about every scrubby tree, every plant and animal. He also nearly causes the Soldier a heart attack when he tries to pick up a rattlesnake.

They travel during the cool hours of evening and night, sleep during the hottest parts of the afternoon. But the way is slower than the Soldier anticipated -- for a boy with a constantly running mouth, Tony tires quickly, and they have to stop to rest more than he planned.

The Soldier knows the only way to guarantee his own survival would be to leave the boy behind to either fend for himself or die. There is no place in the world for the weak. No room for pity.

He does not. He hardly allows himself to consider it.

When they are faced with perhaps a day's worth of water if it is stretched, and a minimum of four more days journey at this pace ahead, when the boy is wavering on his feet and too exhausted to even be cranky, the Soldier makes a decision.

He abandons the last of their supplies, save for the precious water. He picks the boy up onto his back, tucks his legs under his arms, and continues walking.

The boy sleeps, an arm hooked around his neck for balance. The Soldier walks through the worst heat of the day and into the evening.

Dawn breaks to the east, and he still walks. The burn in his muscles, the thirst on his dry tongue tell him that if he stops he may not be able to get up again.

As he walks, the Soldier hums a slow, soothing tune. He doesn't know where it comes from. Only years later will he recognize the song as The Star Spangled Man With a Plan.

They reach the Mexican border town that night.

## Chapter 3

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He and Tony are both dark haired, but their lighter skin and European features mark them apart from the rest of the population. The Soldier works hard to ensure they do not attract extra attention.

Tony picks up Spanish with even more ease than he did Russian. Soon, the Soldier does not allow him to speak English at all. Anyone seeking Tony Stark will be looking for an American child.

They change names and back stories for every town -- sometimes as frequently as once a day. The Soldier has Tony repeat their new identities before every meal and before going to sleep at night.

These are Tony's bedtime stories. This is life and death.

"My name is Yasha and you are Anton. We come from Mexico City and are moving north for work. Repeat it."

"My name is Eduardo and you are Manuel. We live in Guanajuato and will be meeting with your mother and two sisters in San Luis Potosi. Repeat it."

"My name is Lazaro and you are Adan. Your grandmother is ill and we are traveling to Cozumel to take care of her."

"Repeat it again, in Russian and in Spanish."

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Sometimes they stay long enough in one place to rent a small apartment. Tony takes apart every electronic appliance inside, then spends hours putting them back together with patience he does not show at any other time.

The Soldier allows him to sell what he's improved upon, so they earn a little money on the side. The rest, the Soldier steals from unobservant tourists

The urge to return and report the mission failure has faded almost entirely. An occasional twinge in the back of his mind rather than a teeth gritting compulsion. Easily dismissed.

Tony hasn't mentioned his parents in months, and Jarvis very rarely.

However, he doesn't forget the date of his birth, and pesters the Soldier about it weeks before the event.

When the day arrives, Tony is presented with a small stack of math puzzle books. (The Soldier saw them thrown out in one of the wealthier neighborhoods, with only two pages filled in.)

At first Tony is overjoyed, and immediately begins to pour over them with a pencil stub clutched in his fist.

Later, the Soldier finds him staring blankly at the pages, almost pensive.

"What is it?" the Soldier asks, wondering if he made an error. Perhaps Tony would have preferred a toy to take apart.

Tony shrugs a shoulder, one hand resting on the top book. "Nothing." Then he heaves a sigh. "It's just... My name's Tomas today, and yesterday it was Marco, all last year it was Tony, and... I can't remember what it was the year before that."

The Soldier thinks through his answer. Tony is bright, but this life is all he knows. He is so very young, and doesn't understand that frequently changing identities isn't normal.

A lie would be easiest, but the Soldier tries not to lie to him unless it's to protect him.

"I don't remember my third birthday," he says. The truth is, he doesn't remember ever having a birthday, or his true age, though he suspects he's had quite a few.

The boy looks up at him. "Do you remember the name you had, though?"

It's all a blank. "It may have been James," he says, though that doesn't seem right, either.

"Oh." Tony goes back to his puzzle book, and to the Soldier's relief, he doesn't pursue the question further.

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Tony befriends other children his age wherever he goes. One fine spring day, the Soldier watches Tony play with a pack of neighborhood children -- some sort of roughhousing game where the convoluted rules are known only to themselves.

One of the mothers calls their boy in for supper, and the boy asks if Tony can come too.

The mother glances over at the Soldier and smiles softly. "Ask, first," he hears her say.

There's a short discussion among the children. Tony rolls his eyes, but trots up to the Soldier. "Papa, Diego's mother wants to know if we can come over for dinner. Please say yes," he asks in Russian.

The Soldier nods and is glad when Tony turns to his friend with a hollered, Spanish, "HE SAID YES!" in time not to see the surprised look that must be on his face.

Of course, he has called Tony his son to others as not to arouse suspicion. He has even done so within Tony's hearing, and it has been over a year since Tony has questioned it.

Tony is following the back story the Soldier himself had given to him this morning of a father named Javier and a son named Lucas. He does not know why it takes him aback to hear him follow it.

He also does not know what the strange warmth in his chest is, and dismisses it as unnecessary.

Dinner that night is delicious. Diego's mother knows how to prepare a meal, and clearly enjoys feeding odd strangers up.

"Why do you wear that glove?" Diego asks, looking at the one over the Soldier's metal hand. Even in the hottest weather, he is sure to wear long-sleeved shirts.

"He got burned," Tony says. He loves speaking when he knows the answer. "I've seen it. It's really, really gross." Which is not true -- the Soldier does not uncover his hand within Tony's sight.

"I'm so sorry," the mother says. "How did it happen?"

"An accident on a train," the Soldier replies, although he does not know why. There are much likelier stories he could invent. Even Tony scowls across the table at him as if to say he should have thought of something better. "It was long ago," he adds, looking down at his plate.

The mother smiles softly. She's attracted to him; he can see it in her eyes. She is kind, but is too curious.

He and Tony pack up and move again the next night.

---

Tony is six years old when the Soldier returns from the market to see him laying on his stomach, with a stack of colorful comic books spread in front of him.

"Where did you get those?" the Soldier asks, unpacking the groceries.

"Some rich gringo threw them out. Me an' the other kids found them by the dumpster," Tony says. "They're about Captain America. What's for dinner?"

A dull ache starts in the back of the Soldier's mind. He shakes his head, not answering, and the mango in his hand drifts in and out of focus.

He walks to the spread of comic books and glances at the one nearest to his foot. They are knock-offs of American comics, translated into Portuguese which the Soldier does not know and Tony cannot read. But he enjoys looking at the pictures.

*Captain America's Bicentennial Battles* is displayed across the top in English. There is a square-jawed blond man on the cover page, a round red, white, and blue shield in his hands.

The mango slips from Bucky's fingers to land with a splat on the floor. The headache that washes over him is instant and so blinding that he staggers, retching, to the garbage pail.

But it's nothing -- *nothing* to the flood of memories.

He remembers everything. He remembers it all.

Steve, going to war, the Hydra base, Steve, the train, Steve, waking up as Hydra's prisoner with one less arm. Fighting and fighting his captors and losing, and thinking of Steve one last time before Bucky Barnes was submerged in his own mind and the Winter Soldier came alive.

He curls up on the couch, hands clutched to either side of his head. Every man and woman he killed as the Winter Soldier flashes in front of his eyes. He shudders, pressing his face into the smelly cushions, and tries to push them back, but he can't... it's too much...

Tony's alarmed by now. He shakes Bucky's shoulder, asking if he should get help. Bucky shakes

his head no -- he can't do more than that. If he unclenches his jaw he will only scream. And he doesn't think he'll be able to stop.

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He wakes the next day with a small, bony child curled up on the couch beside him. He has a vague memory of Tony offering him some cold cereal at one point, which he'd refused.

Bucky's metal arm wraps carefully around Tony and pulls him closer, feeling the heavy weight of responsibility settle over his shoulders.

*My God*, he thinks, looking at Tony. Howard's boy. *What have I done?*

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Eventually, he makes himself get up because he deserves no sympathy or self-pity. He fixes breakfast for Tony (the mango had gone a little soft and bruised, but was usable).

Then he shuts himself in their tiny bathroom, shaking so badly he can barely stand.

The man staring wide-eyed at him in the bathroom mirror looks the same as he ever has, twenty-five and hellbent for leather. But Bucky was born in 1917, and even if he spent the last decades as the Winter Soldier, being put in and out of cyro, he should have still aged.

He hasn't.

"I thought your arm was burned."

Bucky turns to see Tony has come into the bathroom, staring. The Winter Soldier had never uncovered his arm in his presence, but Bucky needed to get a good look at it. The hateful red star on the shoulder.

"I..." he struggles for a moment. "The bad people. They took it, so now I have this instead."

It's a bad lie -- they've all been bad lies, but the Winter Soldier had not been creative enough for anything else, and Bucky is out of practice.

Tony tilts his head, and Bucky clenches his fist to flex the metal fingers, as much for Tony's benefit as his own.

"Can I see?" Tony asks breathlessly. "Can I see how it works?"

At the kitchen table, Tony's hands are deft and quick as he unscrews the cover over the forearm and looks down at the metal fibers running up to Bucky's shoulder like veins. Tony marvels at the inside, poking gently, delicately at the machinery with a screwdriver. There is a servo that has been grinding against another for some months. Tony removes the piece, cleans the gears, and replaces it. It's as good as new.

A tear traces down Bucky's cheek. He quickly wipes it away and covers the gesture by reaching over to ruffle Tony's hair. "Good job, kid."



Tony looks briefly surprised -- the Winter Soldier had never been particularly emotive. But then he grins.

---

*Bucky... take care of my son.*

I will.

---

## Chapter 4

There are days Bucky can barely make himself rise out of bed; When he finds himself staring at nothing at all for hours, his missions playing in crystal clear quality in his head. Sometimes he becomes so angry he wants to rend and destroy, wants to scream at the injustice of it all.

They had said the war was supposed to be over by Christmas.

The only thing that keeps him stable, keeps him *alive*, is the outcome from his last, worst deed.

Tony is entirely dependent on him. He doesn't understand Bucky's anger and guilt. No matter what is going on in Bucky's head, Tony must eat three times a day, needs a dry place to sleep, needs someone to pretend to understand when he babbles excitedly about an engine repair manual he found in a dusty cabinet.

When the memories and murders crowd close, Bucky makes sure he shuts himself away to rage and break down out of Tony's sight.

And there are good days, too. Days where he feels almost normal. Not the man he was by a long shot, but a man and not just a tool used for killing.

One day, Bucky looks at their bare, one-bedroom apartment he's rented for the week in a squalid neighborhood and thinks, *The kid shouldn't be growing up like this. I need to do better by him.*

They keep to South America, because most of the governments aren't well organized, and it's easier to disappear into the population. But he makes an effort to stay in safer places, rent a house for a month or two at a time.

Sometimes, Tony even attends a local school.

He tells Tony war stories when either of them can't sleep -- keeps the places generic enough so Tony won't pick up they're based in WW2. Bucky recalls child-friendly anecdotes about the Commandos (the whorehouse in Paris will never be mentioned), calls Cap simply Steve -- their fearless leader who is honest and good and always leads them to victory.

In the end, they stay too long in a peaceful house by the beach.

Three Hydra agents attack in the dead of the night. They must want Bucky alive -- they do not try to take him out with sniper shots. Then again, the Winter Soldier was invaluable to their cause.

Bucky kills two of them in his living room, his recently repaired metal arm working perfectly to crush one throat and punch into the chest of the other, collapsing the man's sternum. He puts a bullet through the eye of the third.

Tony did exactly as Bucky had trained him to do, and took cover in his bedroom closet. Bucky finds him curled up in fear, his hands over his ears.

He's seven, almost too big to be easily lifted, but Bucky carries him out of the house, pressing his eyes to his shoulder.

"Don't look, son," he whispers as he walks past the bodies. The rich, tangy smell of blood is thick in the air. "Don't look. Don't look."

Tony doesn't, and Bucky sets the home ablaze as he leaves.

---

"Who are they, those men?"

"They call themselves Hydra."

"Why do they hate us so much?"

"I...I don't know."

"Is it because you blew up all their bases? With the Commandos?"

"Tony," Bucky says with a quick smile. "We didn't just blow up their bases. We *destroyed* them, then salted the earth behind us." Then Steve died, and Hydra rose again. Cut one head off, two more will take its place.

Tony's silent for a long while, then he heaves a sigh. "They killed mom, didn't they? That's why you get sad sometimes."

The car accident -- the Winter Soldier's last mission -- was nearly four years ago, just over half of Tony's lifetime. Bucky suspects Tony's either blocked out the memory of the car accident and his life before that, or confuses it with something else. They've told so many lies and taken on more names than he can count -- sometimes he hears Tony telling other children that he and Bucky used to be rich. They had a butler.

Bucky looks at him, then nods. "She was beautiful," he says, because it was true, from the glimpse he got of Maria Stark, and Howard wouldn't marry any less than the best. "Blonde hair and blue eyes," he says because that's what he sees at night when he closes his eyes. Steve, laughing into their kisses, the slide of his length against Bucky's. How Bucky had one time teased him into actually using his strength, literally taking him over a barrel. "I miss..." *Him* "Her."

---

One of the many indignities Hydra had put Bucky through was to remove his second top molar on the right side, and replace it with a false, hollow tooth. The original plan was for him to become an enhanced Hydra agent, able to think on his own. Only after Bucky spent months fighting the programming was that plan discarded in favor of the complete mind-wipe.

Nevertheless, Bucky still has the hollowed tooth. And soon after the attack, he buys two concentrated cyanide pills. The first goes in his tooth, the second under a fingernail in his metal arm.

If the worst comes he swears he will never allow himself to be taken back, nor will he allow them

to take Tony, to *use* Tony as Bucky had been used.

---

They head south, then east to Rio. Then, in a fit of whimsy, Bucky forges passports and takes Tony to France.

Summer in the Mediterranean is hot and dry, and for a time they live out of an abandoned farmhouse by a vineyard gone fallow.

Tony plays by a nearby river and learns French -- it's not so far from Spanish that he picks it up with ease. Bucky teaches him how to make improvised explosions, and they blow up rocks and tin cans at the riverbank and cheer.

The countryside is nothing like how it had been in the war. Bucky has never seen it so peaceful. There are no bad memories for him here.

---

When summer is over and Tony's absence from the local village school will be noted, they travel to India to lose themselves in the vast and complex population. Hydra does not have much, if any, presence there.

Over the next few years, he and Tony travel where they want: Cambodia, Belize, South Africa, Cypress, Malta. They blend into the crowd as tourists, as a businessman and his son, as vacationers.

It's perhaps no way to raise a child, but Bucky is too cautious -- too paranoid -- to do anything else but keep moving. Sometimes he sees evidence Hydra is still on the lookout for him -- for them both. They cannot stop. They cannot stay.

He has to work hard not to laugh when well-meaning strangers comment how much father and son look alike, because no, even their brown hair is a different color. But people only see what they want to see. Bucky has learned that a long time ago.

Reluctantly, Bucky re-teaches Tony English. He watches carefully to see if any words trigger a memory for the boy, but Tony's ten-years-old, and he last spoke English over six years ago. His accent is muddled, and Bucky trains it out of him, though he cannot help his Brooklyn vowels, which Tony takes up.

He could do worse than sounding like he came from New York.

Tony sucks up ideas and concepts like a sponge, and eventually takes over passport and identity forgery for them both. Then they stop for nearly a month in South Korea, and Tony learns how to use a computer.

Tony falls absolutely head over heels in love. It's the first time Bucky argues with him over leaving. They do, eventually, and the boy is sulky for days.

But at every location afterwards, Tony finds some way to break into a computer system. It becomes a game, a game which Bucky encourages. He sees how the world is changing -- perhaps not all paper will become electronic, but knowing how to use a personal computer will be an asset.

Tony even teaches a little of what he's learned to Bucky, though Bucky couldn't even manage a typewriter back in the day, and Tony teases him when he henpecks.

Tony's growing up. His questions about Hydra become more pointed -- who they are, why he and Bucky are always running from them, how they can be stopped.

Bucky tries to put him off as long as possible. But he knows -- fears -- the day is coming where he will have to tell Tony everything.

But that day has not yet arrived: The second time Hydra attacks is shortly after Tony turns eleven.

## Chapter 5

There was no warning. The first indication Bucky has that they are under attack is when the front door is blasted open, and half a dozen Hydra-masked men come flooding into their small apartment.

He kills one right off the bat with a butterfly knife he keeps on him at all times. Another agent makes the fatal mistake of grabbing his left arm, and is immediately immobilized.

A click of a gun and a shouted, "Stop or the boy dies!" freezes Bucky in place. He turns to see a beefy agent drag Tony out of the kitchen, a gun pressed to the side of his head.

Bucky raises his hands in surrender. "Okay," he says, eyes darting back and forth to gauge the remaining agents, their capabilities and their weapons. "You got me." He takes the chance that they do not know who they are dealing with yet and asks, "What do you want?"

The agent holding Tony smirks. "But you should already know that. Snooping into Hydra's business, Hydra activities."

"No!" Tony gasps, wide-eyed. "He didn't do--" The agent backhands him, hard enough to send him sprawling.

Red bleeds into Bucky's vision. Whatever else happens, he promises himself that agent will be the next to die.

But as Tony falls to the floor, briefly stunned, something clatters from his jacket pocket: a piece of a metal hose. It looks exactly like the hose leading from the propane tank to the stove. Bucky inhales sharply and -- yes -- there's the scent of garlic in the air. Smart boy.

The agents are yelling at each other and Tony is hauled, staggering, to his feet. They don't yet realize what he has done.

Bucky straightens and makes eye contact with the man holding Tony. "You and your team are in over your head," he says, his voice calm and remote. The Winter Soldier had no need to yell or threaten. "You should leave now." And he raises his left hand, letting the sleeve fall down to show the metal arm.

The man's eyes widen in recognition. Bucky waits for that fraction of a second for the fear to set in, for them to focus on him as the threat and to forget about Tony, before he moves.

He twists and grabs the man holding the gun on him. The gun fires, and the shot is so close Bucky feels the flash of heat by his ear. But a fraction of an inch miss is still a miss.

Grabbing the gun from him, he turns and fires once. From this distance, he hits the man holding Tony right between the eyes. The man drops, and Tony bolts back to the kitchen.

Instantly, the remaining agents are on Bucky, piling on and dragging him down, and for one horrible moment Bucky thinks of the hollow tooth filled with cyanide.

Then there is a house-rattling BOOM. Tony has managed to ignite the propane tank.

A wash of intense heat throws Bucky to the floor. He was prepared, unlike the agents, and relieves one of the stunned man of his knife.

He gains the upper hand, and the fight is short and brutal. No agents survive to carry the tale of the Winter Soldier and the boy he is caring for.

He finds Tony outside the back door, slightly singed and with one side of his face swelling up where he'd been struck. But he's alive, and cognizant enough to help Bucky hotwire a car.

Later that night, at a new safe house, Tony clings to Bucky in a small, childish way that he hasn't since he was little.

He's shaking from delayed shock, and Bucky rubs his back and repeats, "It's okay, now. You saved both our lives. You're okay."

"It's my fault they found us," Tony says at last, drawing away and curling up his knees. He is growing up and has his pride. "I invented a computer program to search out Hydra activities, and they must have traced it back, somehow."

Bucky goes still, shock radiating to the soles of his feet. "What? Why?"

"Because... Because you never answer any questions about them. And--"

"How could you be so--" Bucky cuts himself off, turning to run a hand back through his hair. "What were you thinking?!"

"I just wanted to know--You never answer *anything*, and I--" Tony hiccups and buries his face in his hands, shamed. "I'm sorry."

"This isn't a game! Do you know what Hydra represent, what they would *do* to you?"

Tony just shakes his head, face still hidden, and Bucky knows he should have seen this coming. Tony's too smart for his own good, of course he would have questions...

Bucky stands and paces. It takes a long few minutes for him to calm down. If nothing else, being the Winter Soldier taught him to reign in his quick-flash temper. Or maybe he's just getting old.

Tony's still trembling from shock and stress. Looking at him, a large part of the anger runs out of Bucky. Instead, he lets out a long breath and sits by the boy, hands clasped in front of him. "It's... hard for me to talk about Hydra. About what I went through." He closes his eyes, remembering the Rolls Royce with the Stark family careening down the steep ravine. "One day, when you're older, I'll tell you everything." But not now. Not when Tony is still so young and Bucky needs to protect him, because once the truth comes out, Tony will want -- will need -- to distance himself.

Tony shakes his head, dropping his hands and looking up. "I was so careful with the program, I would never -- they must have... They're smarter than me."

He must truly be rattled to admit anyone being smarter than himself. Bucky sighs again. "Hydra have been around since the Second World War, kid. Keeping themselves secret is what they do."

"I'm so sorry, Dad," Tony says, his bottom lip trembling.

It's the last word that gets him. No matter how badly the boy screws up, now or in the future, Bucky has done more to wrong him.

He reaches to chuck Tony lightly on the uninjured side of his chin. "We all make mistakes -- this one we can correct. I'm not badly hurt, and neither are you."

That isn't true. He has a brutal slice down one side where one agent knifed him, but whatever Hydra had done to him back in the day meant it would heal quickly and without a scar.

It's worth the lie to see Tony nod tentatively.

"But," Bucky levels a stern glare at him. "Don't think that doesn't mean you're not on a short leash for awhile. You and your computers. Honestly."

The boy ducks his head.

He's a good kid, despite inheriting Howard Stark's penchant for danger. And at least he's blowing up Hydra agents, not his own labs.

---

They spend the next few months running, weaving a complex path around the world. One where they change identities every few days. Change hair color, too.

It's six weeks before Bucky judges it's safe to stay in one place for as long as three days. Tony checks the local computer networks for any signs, any hints they're being shadowed. There is nothing.

Whatever Hydra knows about them -- whatever Hydra *thinks* they know about them -- they are not being followed.

Life returns back to normal. For them.

---

Bucky has done his best to educate Tony, but he's working with a twelve grade education that's over fifty years out of date.

Tony speaks and reads five languages fluently, and has a workman's grasp of a handful of others. He takes to computer systems -- any computer-- like a duck to water, has been completing routine maintenance on Bucky's metal arm, and any household appliance he can get his hands on. Bucky hasn't been able to help him out with his favorite math puzzle-books since he was eight.

The boy barely comes up to Bucky's shoulder in height, but he's so beyond him it's terrifying.

Tony's twelfth birthday is in two weeks, and they are in Japan. It's a cold, but clear spring day, and Bucky drags him out to a strolling tea garden. Tony is twitchy and clearly wanting to do something else -- he's on the verge of being a teenager, and is becoming huffy and impatient with life, looking to rebel against something, but not sure what yet.

Bucky remembers how Tony fought him the first few weeks when he was four. He smiles, reaching over to ruffle Tony's hair.

"Dooon't," Tony complains, patting it back into order with a scowl. Recently, he's been trying for some high new-style hair-do, like he's seen on MTV.



Bucky remembers his father giving him the same talk he's about to give, right before his father went off and died in the Great War. He hopes Tony is a better listener than Bucky was at that age.

"You're almost a man now--" Bucky starts.

The look Tony gives him is of wide-eyed horror. "Are you seriously giving me the birds and bees speech in a place where there is actual birds and bees?"

"You already got that last year. Want it again?"

He screws up his face. "You made me calculate the estimated cost of raising and supporting a child for eighteen years, then compounded it with interest and compared it to the average cost of a home in three countries."

Bucky beams. "Well, you do like your math problems. Thought I would speak your language, if you ever got a girl in the family way."

Tony rolls his eyes and mutters something in Russian.

"Ever thought about the future?" Bucky asks, coming back to the topic at hand. "About what you want to do when you grow up?"

Tony shrugs.

"It's almost time for you to decide what kind of man you will be," Bucky presses.

"I want to fight Hydra. They are trying to take over the world, and I want to stop them," Tony says automatically. And that's not too much of a surprise. All of his life, he's known them as the enemy, and he's getting to the age where running isn't good enough. Soon, he will want to fight back.

Bucky nods. "What about computers? Electronics? All your gizmos."

Tony catches his bottom lip between his teeth.

"Nothing wrong with fighting," Bucky says, "But maybe you should play to your strengths."

He gives Bucky a suspicious look. "What does that mean?"

"You outta learn a thing or two. I think... we should try school, for you."

Tony stops and stares at him. "We can't stay in place for too long." But the hope in his eyes tells Bucky he's hit the nail right on the head.

"I have a plan. I've been working on it."

"Really? We can stay in one house? I can go to school?"

Most kids hate school. Bucky sure did, but the sudden hunger on Tony's face speaks volumes. "You should try a real school at least once," Bucky hedges. He hates to make promises he might not be able to keep. "You can stay for a year or two and see how you like it. Our identities will have to be airtight. It won't be easy -- we'll have to stick to one story for awhile for it to work."

"Yes," Tony says at once. "Sure. Fine. How do we start?"

Bucky grins.



## Chapter 6

### Chapter Notes

This is where I start messing with Tony's timeline a little...

They work on the new identities together, forge all the necessary paperwork. According to their doctored documents, they've moved from New Jersey where Tony was homeschooled until his mother tragically died in a car accident.

It's Bucky's idea to use the last name of Barnes. It's a risk, but not a terrible one. It's a common enough name in America as to not stand out.

Bucky's had his own name taken from him -- if he's settling in a place for a length of time, he wants something to be his. Truly his.

So James "Jim" Barnes and Antonio Steven Barnes move into a small town in Kansas.

Bucky buys a machinist's shop with a connecting five acre farm. They age Tony up a year on paper so he can go straight into high school with the incoming Freshmen class.

---

"Your son is exceptionally bright, Mr. Barnes."

"Thank you, I've always thought so."

"We'd like to move him to our AP classes, and if he can handle the workload we may be able to start him on college prep courses."

"As long as he's not overwhelmed. Tony's a great kid, but he needs time to be a kid."

"I can handle it, Dad."

---

He does, and more. Tony is charming with charisma he must have inherited from Howard, and a

slickness and false modesty he learned from years of lies at Bucky's side.

By the time the first semester is over, he's taking senior AP classes, and honors everything. Despite his teacher's suggestions, Bucky refuses to let him advance ahead of his age group, and surprisingly Tony agrees. This is the first time they ever stopped running, and he's clearly taking advantage of every moment.

He has a group of friends and even a girlfriend. She's a redheaded spitfire everyone calls Pepper, and she and Tony are on and off so frequently Bucky soon stops keeping track.

She comes over for dinner at least a few times every month. She and Tony bicker like lifelong friends, and Bucky likes the way she seems to instinctively keep Tony on his toes.

The machine shop does well. He fixes tractors, farm equipment, and old style-cars with cobbled together knowledge from his long life, and Tony's intuitive talent.

He closes down shop during Tony's summer vacation, and they hop around the world laying a careful trail of breadcrumbs with "Winter Soldier" sightings. Hydra is still searching for him -- for both of them, Bucky suspects -- and if they're looking in the former Soviet Union, they aren't paying attention to Kansas.

They return home to the farm in the fall, and somehow Bucky is tricked into joining the PTA.

Tony starts his Sophomore year, and sometimes in the morning Bucky looks outside at the rising sun from the kitchen window and wonders at the fact he's happy.

# Tony

## Chapter Notes

Be aware: This chapter is from Tony's POV.

"I hate history," Tony groans, flopping down on the warm grassy knoll outside the school library. It's an unusually warm fall day, and it's such a waste to spend it on stuff that happened decades before he was even born. "Give me math, give me physics or chem-lab--"

"Tony," Pepper sighs in that exasperated way he loves.

--Give me something whose version doesn't change depending on who wrote it," Tony finishes with a grin.

"It's basic U.S. History," Pepper says, opening her textbook. "There's only one version."

Tony could tell her he's been all around the world and that is certainly *not* the case. Instead, he bites his lip and focuses on how her pretty red hair looks in the fall sunshine. He kinda wants to run his hand through it. Maybe later.

"We're supposed to read chapter seven, and then answer the questions at the end, right?" she asks, flipping the pages. Then she peers down close, slaps her hand over her mouth, and giggles.

He grins, catching her mood. "What? World War Two is really that funny?"

"No, look." She pushes the book over and taps one fingernail on a picture. "It's just... he kinda looks like your dad."

The black and white picture is of a gathered group of military men. It's a little fuzzy, but she's right. The man standing to the right of the big leader is--wow. He looks just like him.

"Maybe," Tony hedges. It's long been taught to him to back away from anything too personal, and something inside is ringing warning bells. He doesn't know why.

The caption under the picture reads: Several special forces groups raided Nazi bases of operation behind enemy lines. Pictured from left to right: *Jacques Dernier, Gabriel Jones, James "Bucky" Barnes, Steven Rogers, Timothy Dugan, Howard Stark, Jim Morita.*

Pepper takes the textbook back from him. She reads the caption, her eyes wide. "His last name is Barnes, too. Do you think...?"

Except he and Dad made up this last name for official documents. But she doesn't know that. Tony makes himself shrug. His heart, though, is racing.

She frowns. "It's really uncanny, Tony. Maybe he's a great-grandpa, or uncle, or something." Then

she flips to the back glossary, and sighs, "1917 to 1944. He died in the war."

"Poor great uncle Bucky," Tony snarks, then stops as a fragment of a memory flashes through his mind. His dad used to have him repeat names they were using a lot, when he was little and Tony didn't understand the danger they were in.

They had been... driving?

*"What's your name?" Tony had asked.*

*"Bucky."*

"Tony?" Pepper asks.

The fragment dissipates, and Tony isn't sure if it was real or not anyway. They've used so many names, his dad probably did call himself Bucky once.

But Pepper's looking at him like he's a total headcase, so Tony leans in to kiss her, like that had been on his mind instead. She kisses back for a moment, then pushes him away, and they go back studying for their upcoming test on the major European battles of World War Two.

---

Tony doesn't know why the old timey picture sticks with him through the day. It's just... he doesn't know anything about his grandparents, though they're probably old and dead. He never really thought about them before, or if he has any cousins.

Dad gets a tragic look on his face anytime Tony brings up Mom, but Tony's pretty smart. He figured out a long time ago she was killed by Hydra, and that's why they went on the run. Probably why his dad doesn't date, either. Other than the metal arm thing.

(Though he swears he's caught his dad checking out a few guys now and then, which was weird, but fine except--well, Tony's brain starts short circuiting every time he thinks about Dad and sex and ewww nonononono.)

But. What if Bucky Barnes was really related to them somehow? Yeah, he died when he was twenty-five, but he could have had a kid. You were like an old maid if you didn't marry by nineteen or something, back then.

Plus, he remembers the old comics. Captain America fought Hydra, not Nazi's (well, not exactly Nazi's). Maybe this was a whole family legacy... thing.

So Tony brings his U.S. History textbook home, along with his Advanced Chem he still has to study for.

He's sitting at the kitchen table, looking over the periodic table of elements, and trying to figure out how to bring it up, when his Dad comes in from the machine shop. He stops by the sink to wash off motor oil grease off his hands with lava soap. Or at least, the fleshy hand. He usually wears a glove or something to keep grease from getting in the metal joints.

"Hey kid, how was school?"

Tony's hand rests on the textbook. He's got the page dog-eared. All he needs to do is open it.

"Okay... um, what's for dinner?"

"Dunno. What are you making?" his dad says, turning to dry his hands on the towel nearby.

Tony shrugs. They've had this dumb conversation a thousand times. It's easy and familiar.

"Depends. What are you buying?"

"Do I look like I'm made of money?" his dad predictably says, then turns to the cabinet and starts pulling down boxes. "How's panko breaded chicken sound?"

"Slightly eatable."

"That's how I make it. Chicken is supposed to be pink in the middle, right?"

"Oh, ha ha. You're funny. You should be a comedian." Tony hesitates, then slides the science book over his history book. It's stupid. It's a coincidence. And even if it isn't... so what if Bucky Barnes is related to them? He died in the forties. Dad wouldn't have known him.

It just... doesn't matter.

---

He and his father get along really well. Most of his friends hate their parents, but Tony only has the one, and he's got to get along with what he has. It helps they've been through a lot together, too.

But that didn't mean his dad wasn't an *epic dick* sometimes.

"What do you mean I can't go?" Tony demands, shocked. "Is it the violence? Because that ship sailed when you let me see Terminator 2--"

"It's disrespectful," his dad replies, his head stuck inside the tractor he's trying (and failing) to repair. Tony suspects it's the solenoids, but like hell is he going to say anything right now. "Captain America was a war hero, and that movie is Hollywood trash."

Tony throws up his hands in frustration. "Everyone in my group is going. If I don't, I'll look like a total dweeb."

"Tough it out."

"Are you kidding? You're the one always talking about how we should blend in."

His father straightens up to glare at him. "Blending in is different from being a follower. I taught you that, too."

"No, you're just a hypocrite." Not his most inventive comeback, but Tony storms out of the garage anyway, and makes sure to slam every door he comes across until he gets to his room, and locks the door.

He doesn't come down for dinner. Once it gets dark, he sneaks out his window, walks two miles to town, and meets with his friends at the cinema.

The movie is terrible.

For some reason, they've set it in the present day. Cap's shield looks like it's made of tinfoil, and he spouts cheesy one-liners that would make Arnold Schwarzenegger cringe. The director aged the Bucky Barnes character to ten-years-old for some reason, gave him a cape to make him look like Robin, and had him fawn over Cap in a weird way that made Tony's stomach squirm. The plot was nonsensical, too, with an alien who calls himself Thor, and something about moonstones and... Tony quits paying attention.

He and Pepper start making out halfway through, just for something to do, while their friends throw popcorn at the screen.

One of Tony's friends drives him home so he doesn't have to walk. He cringes inside when he sees the kitchen lights are still on.

His dad is sitting at the kitchen table, a bottle of vodka in front of him. That's really strange. Tony's never seen him drink.

Dad looks like hell, too. Red around the eyes, and kinda pale. As Tony walks in, he throws back a shot, sets the small glass down on the table and asks, "How was it?"

"Um... Pretty horrible?" Tony says hesitantly, wondering what the hell has gotten into him.

His dad doesn't say anything. It's like he's waiting for something else. It's all really weird.

Tony lets the silence drag on for a moment, then hooks his thumb over his shoulder. "Anyway, I'm off to bed, so...."

"Tony."

He turns, stops.

"I shouldn't have... I don't care what you see with your friends, and as long as it ain't illegal, I don't mind what you get up to." His dad's expression hardens. "But never forget we are being hunted. If you *ever* sneak out again without leaving a note telling me where you are and when you'll be back, I will find you and drag you home by the ear. You get it?"

And this was why he didn't want to bring up the whole 'Bucky Barnes is probably my grandpa' thing. He really, really doesn't like the freaky, dead-eyed look on his dad's face whenever anything Hydra is brought up.

"Yeah," Tony says. "I got it." Then he adds quickly. "Didn't mean to make you worry." Before he scurries up to the security of his room.



## Chapter 8

On a frozen winter's day, Bucky is busy cleaning half-burnt oatmeal out of a pan (It was Tony's doing. The kid needs to learn not to turn the burner on so high). He half hears Tony walk into the kitchen, and thump a thick stack of folders and books down on the table. "I want to go to college."

"What?" Bucky says, taken by surprise.

Tony just lifts up his chin and starts spouting how he is really smart, but he needs to learn more. How if he's going to fight Hydra, he needs to be better, faster at robotics and engineering. It's the future and he wants to beat the at their own game. He also says that his and Bucky's identities have held up just fine so far, so they'll last for a few more years. It's not like Tony will take the normal track through college anyway -- he'll probably complete a degree in half the time.

And Bucky's chest is half bursting in pride, but somehow he keeps it from showing on his face. He lets Tony say his fill, pretends to consider it for a moment.

"You know," he says. "You're the first in the family to go to college." Which was true in both cases -- Howard was a genius, but a self-made man. And Bucky sure as heck didn't pursue higher education.

Tony practically preens.

---

Tony graduates valedictorian in his class, with a fistful of scholarships to MIT. He's already ahead of the game, and has been taking courses via correspondence over his senior year.

They do not travel overseas to lay false leads that summer. Instead, Tony alternates between being a wild child with his friends -- one last blowout before they all separate to college or the army -- and working with Bucky quietly, almost desperately in the machine shop. Both of them know that their small slice of life, of *peace*, they'd forged is coming to an end.

When fall arrives, Bucky rents a tow-trailer. They pack it with all Tony's possessions he's accumulated over the past four years, and then they take the long drive to Massachusetts.

After Tony's settled in the dorm, Bucky takes the opportunity to drag him roughly over and hug him close.

"Daaaaaad," Tony complains, but hugs him back. "I'll be back for the big holidays, and summer. Not spring break, though." He wiggles his eyebrows. "Spring break's all about Cancun."

"Just make sure you wrap it, kid," Bucky says around the lump in his throat. "The clap's not as fun as advertised."

"Ugh. No. Not having this conversation. Gross." But Tony hugs him once more -- tight, before they separate.

---

Bucky returns to their empty farm house, puts the closed sign on the machine shop, and with a heavy heart, starts the first draft of a letter that will take him three years to complete.

---

Tony takes to college life like he was born for it. Bucky watches with a mix of amusement and resignation as he sails through his undergraduate degrees. His doctoral project is to build a robotic assistant. He whimsically calls it Dum-E and sends Polaroid's of it with every letter back home.

He's always been a little short for his perceived age, but he's growing into his father's dark, suave looks. Between that and his quick wit, it's a miracle no one has yet put two and two together.

The last six months it takes for Tony to complete his degree, Bucky spends every moment waiting for the shoe to drop. For someone to figure it out.

On graduation day he watches from the stands as Tony receives his doctorate in robotic engineering, and a second masters in advanced mathematics. The parents around Bucky look much older than himself, and a couple of them ask if he's Tony's brother. They don't know the man sitting next to them is nearing ninety and has yet to grow a gray hair.

Tony's beaming when he comes down from the stage, the cap askew on his head.

"I'm so proud," Bucky says as he claps him on the shoulder. "You've done good, kid."

Tony pulls back, flushed with pride, but confusion in his eyes. He's picking up on Bucky's strained mood. "I know," he says flippantly. "Are you okay?"

"Just feeling old."

"You don't look it." He grins. "Me and some of the guys are going for graduation dinner. You need to meet Jim Rhodes -- Ha, Jim and Jim. You two can be the Jims."

"Sure," Bucky lies, then when he hugs Tony again -- the last time he knows he will hold his son -- he slips a thick manila folder into his hand.

Tony starts and looks down at it, but Bucky shakes his head.

"Read it, later. After the dinner. You've always asked about Hydra -- these are your answers."

Tony sucks in a half breath. "What do you mean?"

"You know, kid," he says and glances meaningfully at the other parents, all looking older than himself. "I don't think you've wanted to let yourself--but, you already know."

One of Tony's friends calls out to him, and Tony turns to reply that he'll be there in a second.

Bucky is certain to be gone when he turns back.

---

The letter Bucky wrote and rewrote countless times over the last few years contains a full explanation of his deeds, from the moment he fell off the train to shooting out the Stark's tires.

He included the Will and Testament of the late Howard Stark along with newspaper clippings of the accident to verify his story. He even added a copy of Tony's birth certificate he was able to steal from the state registry.

Howard's Will bequeaths Tony the company at the age of 21. Tony is legally -- truly -- 20.

He doesn't ask for forgiveness in the letter-- he knows he will never get it.

Bucky knows that when Tony goes back to the farmhouse (and he will) there will be nothing for him. Nothing that says a man named Jim Barnes lived there with his son. Bucky sold everything but the empty house itself. The shop has been shuttered for months, the small acres of land untended. Everything has been taken care of.

He's set Tony free.

## Chapter 9

### Chapter Notes

Remember when I said I was messing with Tony's timeline a little?

Bucky escapes to corners of the world he never dared take Tony: the rolling shack neighborhoods of Rio, the gambling houses in Mumbai, the coal villages of Czechoslovakia.

For the first time in his life, Bucky is alone. Before, there had always been Steve. Then his army unit, then Steve again (It's always been Steve -- aside from Tony, he's the only one who had ever mattered). Even the Winter Soldier had Hydra handlers, and if he was alone, he never felt it.

Now, curled up in his latest safe house -- shivering against the first year's frost in a ratty coat, with the edges of the metal arm freezing against his skin, he wonders if it wouldn't be better to break his hollow tooth and end it all. He's had a long, long life.

But in the end, Bucky is a fighter.

Signs of Hydra resurgence are subtle, but there if one knows how to look. Bucky destroys their nests wherever he finds them. The Winter Soldier becomes their nightmare, and he wants to pay back every pound of flesh -- every year -- they took from him.

Nine months later, he's walking by a newsstand in Rochester. A familiar face catches his eye, and he stops to stare. Tony is on the cover of Forbes Magazine, dressed in a slick, well-cut suit. Next to him stands Obadiah Stane -- the current head of Stark Industries. The header splashed across the cover declares that the prodigal son has returned.

Bucky knows a man with as much to lose as Stane would do no less than order a full DNA test before any public announcements were made.

Tony is where he should be -- where he has always meant to be.

More magazines come out over the next few months. Slick, professionally photographed pieces. Tony becomes a recognizable public figure, as if forcefully shrugging off a childhood of hiding in the shadows. He famously refuses point-blank to answer any questions about his past: where he came from, what happened after his famous parents died. There is an interview in Vogue where Tony's asked about his childhood one too many times, and finally states he was raised by wolves. When the reporter presses too hard, Tony walks out of the interview.

In the photoshoot, Tony stares back at the camera as if to say, "*Fuck you*".

---

According to all media reports, Stark Industries, which after nearly two decades of slow decline, is once again rocketing to the top of military contract lists. Tony's new designs on robotic weaponry and next generation smart missiles revolutionize the industry. Stark Industries becomes direct competitors with Lockheed-Martin and HammerTech.

Then, five years and four months after Bucky handed Tony the manila envelope, Tony travels to Afghanistan for a presentation on a new Jericho missile, and his convoy is attacked.

Bucky gives it a week, because he had made damn sure Tony knew the theory of resisting basic interrogations. The boy can take care of himself. And yes, maybe Bucky is a coward, but he doesn't want to show up where he isn't wanted. Isn't needed.

But the days pass, the media speculation is rampant, and it seems the military doesn't have much of a clue.

Bucky considers traveling straight to Afghanistan, but his memories of the place are decades old from two successful assassinations. The area has been unstable and changing ever since then. It would be like trying to find a needle in a very hostile haystack.

Instead, Bucky starts from the other direction. He travels to Southern California. Stark Industries corporate office is based in New York, but the R&D branch Tony headed up is just outside of Malibu. If this is an inside job -- and he suspects it is, someone knew exactly where and when to capture him -- the clues will be there.

It's easy to duplicate a night janitor's access badge and sneak into the offices after they've closed. What he doesn't expect is for all the doors and windows to seal shut around him, just as he's getting to the good files.

"Unauthorized entry," says a cool, British voice from somewhere in the ceiling. "Please stay where you are while the local police authorities are contacted."

Bucky squints at the ceiling, wondering if the voice is man or machine. "Who are you?"

There's a pause.

"Voice recognition confirmed. Welcome, James Buchanan Barnes. Request for local police assist has been canceled."

Now this is interesting. Bucky tilts his head, figuring this is one of Tony's computer systems.

"Funny, I don't feel welcome, seeing as the doors are still closed."

"Indeed."

Ohh. So it has a personality. Bucky gets the feeling he's fallen into the equivalent of a live mouse trap, where the creator won't be back to check his work for a long time. Bucky's not prone to panic, and he's pretty sure he can bust a hole through the door and shuttered windows. He shrugs and returns back to the files.

The room is more or less sound-proof. Bucky receives no warning before one of the doors smoothly slides open.

"JARVIS, what is this about--" A redheaded woman stops in surprise and squints at him. She looks familiar, and for a moment he can't place where he's seen her before. "Mr. Barnes?"

Then it clicks. It's been years since he's seen Pepper. She went off to Stanford after high school to

pursue a business degree. She and Tony must have reconnected after he graduated.

She's grown up now -- tall and lovely, and oddly, looking not too much younger than himself.

He straightens. "Pepper, what's a pretty girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Something dangerous and angry flashes behind her eyes. Without a word, she strides over and slaps him, right across the face.

He doesn't try to stop her.

Her voice is low and angry, with only the hint of a tremor. "Do you have anything to do with Tony's disappearance?"

"No," Bucky says.

"Is it the people you work for?"

"It's not their style, and I don't exactly work for them anymore."

"Why are you--" she starts, then shakes her head, dismissing the question. "You *abandoned* him."

Her words hurt where her slap did not. He flinches and leans back against the counter, affecting a relaxed pose. "If he told you that much, you know why."

Pepper's nostrils flare. "He didn't. He was drunk and rambling, and I knew you from before. I put it together."

Then she probably doesn't have as much information as she thinks she does. Bucky assesses this woman, a person he's known since she was a young teen, and who Tony thought highly enough to seek out again and hire.

Slowly, Bucky tugs off the dark glove he keeps over his metal hand. Pepper steps back, her eyes wide.

"Oh my God," she says. "That is so Terminator." She stares at him. "You're not a terminator, are you?"

Bucky smirks, but shakes his head. "I have ... a certain skill-set. I can find Tony, if he's alive, but I need information."

He's not sure she's listening. She's staring at him, as if putting several things together, her finely plucked eyebrows furrowing. "You... haven't aged a day, have you? Oh my God."

"Pepper," he says.

Shaking her head, she visibly pulls herself together. "Okay, no. The military is searching, but privately the Stark Industries liaison says they don't have any leads."

"Then he's probably alive." Bucky ignores the twisting in his gut as he thinks of what he--what *the Soldier* would do, or be ordered to do with a live package as valuable as Tony Stark. "His death would be just the type of spectacle they would want -- there's no reason to keep it quiet."

"But we haven't received a ransom note," she says.

"Then they want him for something else." He turns to the computer in the middle of the office and

tries not to grimace. "You any good with... that thing?"

She looks at him like he's a total screwball. "... Yes?"

"I don't get computers, they're a little before my time." It's the closest he's ever come to admitting aloud how old he is. "But I do know how the type of people who grabbed Tony operate. Between the two of us, we might be able to figure something out."

Still, Pepper hesitates. "He isn't your son," she says. It's a statement, but the question is there in the undertone. *Why are you doing this?*

Bucky takes a breath, then lets it out. His metal hand curls into a fist. He doesn't know what to say. 'Howard asked me to take care of him' is too trite. 'He isn't my blood, but he's still my son' is the truth, but Bucky lost the right to say that a long time ago.

"I wish I could take back what happened--what *I* did," Bucky corrects. Hydra sent him to kill the Starks, but he was still the one who pulled the trigger. "If I was strong enough to break the programming even a few minutes earlier, things would have been different. But I wasn't, and Howard and Maria died. Everything I've done since then was to keep Tony safe. This is no different."

"If I may," the voice from above interjects before Pepper can answer. "Based on current media reports and historical data from previous kidnappings in the region, I have calculated Sir's safe return as less than ten percent, and falling each day."

"It's that good?" Bucky murmurs, his heart sinking.

"So, what are you saying, JARVIS?" Pepper asks, giving Bucky an unpleasant start. *Jarvis?* "We could use all the help we can get?"

"As you say, Ms. Potts."

The stare she turns on Bucky is cold and flat. "I'll be watching you very closely, and so will JARVIS. You make one move neither one of us like, and I'm calling the police."

Bucky nods. The police, he can handle. It's Tony's death he's not so sure of.

---

With the computers and Pepper's know-how, they gain access into the main servers of Stark Tech. From there, Bucky only has to imagine how he would go about getting the CEO of a major corporation killed, and work backwards.

Obadiah Stane was slowly, but surely, being pushed out of Stark Incorporated. The board of directors were besotted by Tony: a young, energetic genius who had their stock skyrocketing. Out with the old, in with the new.

So Stane had most likely been the one to order a hit, from a bunch of third-rate terrorists calling themselves the Ten Rings. The same people he was apparently selling Stark weapons under the table.

Then Stane made his biggest mistake: he underpaid them.

There *was* a ransom note, it turned out. A video made of half-hearted attempts to blackmail Stane and get their money back.

Bucky watches the video twice. Tony, kneeling and clutching a car battery to his chest, swaying on his knees. He's alive, but this was sent weeks ago. He could be long dead by now.

Bucky shuts down the video and emails it as an attachment to Pepper. She will know who to contact.

Meanwhile, he has to move fast to get to Stane before the police do.

---

Obadiah Stane's house is the height of luxury, but he is apparently a man secure in his power. His security systems are simple to bypass. The Winter Soldier used to be one of the cold and the shadows -- Bucky draws upon his old training now, cutting the power to the house and meeting the man at the top of his own staircase when he comes to investigate.

Bucky grabs him by the throat.

"Where is he? Where's Tony Stark?"

Stane chokes a little and claws at his arm, his eyes going wide when he feels only the metal.

"No," Stane gasps, panicked. "Whatever Hydra is paying you... I can pay... double."

His words hit Bucky like a punch to the chest. Stane knows of the Winter Soldier.

And the only people who knows of the Winter Soldier are those who have used him.

*Howard...*

"You hired me once," Bucky says, low, like he's actually considering it.

Stane's face contorts into a mask of rage. "You didn't finish your mission... You left me to... clean up your mess... you owe me."

Bucky's fingers tighten around his neck. It takes everything, absolutely every last bit of self control he's scrounged up in his long, long life not to crush Stane's throat. "Where is Tony?" he repeats, the Soldier in the forefront of his mind and his heart.

"I... don't... know..." Stane gasps. "Let me go. I can pay you..."

Bucky suspects he's telling the truth, because if Stane truly knew where Tony was, he would be dead by now.

The smart thing -- the right thing -- would be to let the authorities throw him in prison. Let him rot. Instead, Bucky brings Stane close, looks him dead in the eye.

"Hail Hydra," he intones, then pushes Stane backwards.

The man tumbles down the stairs, and Bucky hears at least one sickening crack of a bone breaking. When he checks on him at the bottom, Stane is unconscious, but alive.



He sees flashing lights of police vehicles coming up the man's driveway. There's at least three police cruisers and one SUV with SHIELD marked on the side. Pepper has clearly sent the video on.

It's time to leave.

---

Pepper gives him a long, searching look, later, as news reports come in detailing Stane's unfortunate fall down the stairway of his own house. He was trying to allude capture, the media speculate. He'll be in the hospital for several days, under strict police custody.

Pepper's seen the files and evidence. She doesn't ask, and Bucky's estimation of her rises.

But even with all they've found, they're no closer to Tony.

---

A week later, Bucky is on the verge of taking a Stark Industries chartered jet to the region -- computers can only do so much, and he had always done his best work with boots on the ground, when Pepper comes charging into the room they are using as an office. Her face is white as a sheet.

"They've found him. He's alive," Pepper blurts, and Bucky feels himself go still -- hope a bubble in his throat he can't swallow down. "He--they don't know much, yet. He caused some kind of explosion and used it to escape--"

"He's alive?" Bucky rasps, that part still sinking in. He has to work not to sit down, hard. He doesn't realize until now that he didn't expect it. He's not used to happy endings. "Is he hurt?"

"Rhodey said, there--there's something with his chest?" She shakes her head. "But he's refused medical intervention. They'll be landing in twelve hours."

Bucky swallows, then nods. He should have known the kid would pull through on his own. He has lady luck on his side -- always had, ever since he was a toddler. "Good." He picks up a thick stack of papers, the results from raiding Stane's office. "This is the last of it -- should be collaborated by your computers. All the evidence you'll need to prove Stane was double-dealing StarkTech."

Her expression goes hard. "You're leaving?"

"You said it, he's alive." Bucky shakes his head. "He doesn't need me." At least he's paved the way the best he could for Tony's safe return. Without Stane, he can... go on with life.

He's surprised when Pepper steps right in front of the door, blocking his exit. "Tony has just been through three months of hell," she says, low and angry. "He needs all the people on his side he can get."

"His side? I *killed* his parents," Bucky's voice cracks on the word, and he knows Pepper heard it.

She purses her lips. "So the least you can do is give him the satisfaction of throwing you out,

instead of just... just *leaving* him again."

It's not her words that convince him. It's the emotion in her eyes. And yes, maybe he misses the kid. Well. Not a kid anymore. But in some ways Tony will always be that fighting four-year-old he'd taken in. The boy who had slipped into his heart, when Bucky didn't know his own name.

Slowly, he turns and sits back down. "It's going to be ugly."

Pepper doesn't answer for a long moment. "I think... it'll be good for him." She tilts her head slightly, regarding him. "For you, too."

## Chapter 10

Bucky watches the news conference from Tony's penthouse living room. He's not sure if he is ready to burst from pride or grief as Tony, who looks like he's aged ten years in the last three months, gazes over the crowd of reporters and says, "I wish I knew Howard Stark. I would have asked him so many things. How he got into the weapons industry, why he did it, and what he thought of it now." His expression hardens. "But as you all know, I can't. So, effective immediately, Stark Industries will no longer be manufacturing weapons--"

The rest of his words are briefly drowned out by the reporters. Some official with a Stark Industries logo on their jacket takes the opportunity to step in front of the microphone. Tony is ushered out, and Bucky turns off the TV.

He's only made one request of Pepper: That she tell Tony he's here. If Tony wants Bucky to go without seeing him, he'll go.

No word comes, and an hour later he hears a car pull into the driveway.

Bucky lets out a long breath and rubs his right palm on his knee. He stands.

Tony walks in, one arm in a sling, Pepper following. He doesn't look surprised to see Bucky -- he can't read his mood at all, other than he looks sunburnt and exhausted.

Tony speaks. "You're late to the party, Old School."

Bucky inclines his head to the TV. "That was a party?"

"That's how Stark's do it."

Bucky hesitates, unsure where this is going, but there has been something itching at the back of his mind for the last hour. "You said in the conference what--" he means to say 'your father', but it doesn't come, "--Howard would have thought. He was an industrialist, and he was proud of the weapons he made for the boys. The Howard I knew would have hated that announcement."

Tony eyes him for a moment. "Good. What did you think of it?"

Bucky smirks.

That's apparently all the answer Tony needs. He turns to Pepper. "All I've wanted for three months is to have an American cheeseburger and to sleep in my own bed. I've had the first, now I'm doing the second. Hold my calls, Ms. Potts."

He turns and walks away from them, down the hall.

Pepper looks at Bucky, who shrugs and sits back down.

"He was always a weird kid," he says.

---

Tony staggers back into the living room eight hours later, showered, shaved, and his arm out of the sling.

Bucky's using a tablet to flip through internet articles about Stark Industries. It's as not as good as an old fashioned newspaper, but it does the trick. Between Stane's untimely death and Tony's conference, all of the major news sources are predicting an unprecedented stock plummet.

Tony glances at him, but heads straight to the bar set in the back. He returns with two large glasses, and pours a generous amount of whiskey for both.

"How did they make you do it?" he asks, setting a glass beside Bucky, and sitting on the other end of the couch. At Bucky's look, he elaborates. "Bucky Barnes was a friend of Howard Stark."

Ah, now he knows the reason for the drink. Bucky grimaces and knocks back a gulp. It burns all the way down. "I said it in the letter: I had no idea who he was. Didn't know who I was, either."

"I've read up on brainwashing," Tony says. "It's not an exact science."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't exactly stable. They... kept me on ice, cryogenically frozen between missions. Then they'd wipe my brain because parts of me kept breaking through."

"Killing little boys not on your agenda?"

"Tony--"

"Don't," Tony snaps. "I'm asking the questions." He sets down his drink and looks hard at Bucky. "What was it? Obligation? Guilt?"

It takes a moment for Bucky to realize where he's going with this, and he doesn't know why he's surprised, but damn it *hurts*. "No. Never. Howard asked me to take care of you, but he was nothing to the Soldier. Just another mission. He--*I* didn't know pity." He looks Tony in the eye. "I didn't complete the mission and kill you because I didn't want to. Later, because you were mine."

Tony blinks a couple times, then leans back. "You called him the Soldier in your letter--which is dissociative and probably unhealthy, by the way. When did you fully break the programming?"

"You were six."

Tony's eyes go briefly unfocused in thought, probably trying to remember if Bucky acted anyway different during that time. Then he shakes his head and drags a hand down his face. The neckline of his shirt shifts, and Bucky catches a glimpse of a glow there.

"I've come off some really bad months," Tony says, probably meaning to be sarcastic, but it just comes out tired. "You might have heard about them. And my PA tells me Stane arranged it all, and was double-dealing to terrorist hot-zones, you know, before he mysteriously fell down his own staircase."

Bucky wasn't going to deny it, so he says nothing.

"Pepper went through my parents old files -- did you know that?" Tony blurts, suddenly, "I was four-years-old and I'd already been admitted to a boarding school two states away for when I turned seven. Very prestigious. I was barely speaking in complex sentences, and they already had plans to get rid of me. And in all the family videos I've scrounged up, I'm off to the side, being taken care of by the butler and nannies."

He pauses, takes a breath. "Meanwhile you gave me this weird, fucked up, globe-trotting childhood -- but somehow I was *happy*--" his voice breaks on the word.

Bucky isn't sure who moves, but somehow his son is in his arms, hugging him back and still speaking, "You son of a bitch. You dumped this all on me and *left*, and--I don't even remember them. How am I supposed to mourn them when I don't remember them?"

It's an honest question, but Bucky shakes his head, his throat tight. "I don't know."

Tony tugs away. Bucky lets him.

"I have things I need to do," Tony says, looking to the side. "There's this whole Stark legacy merchant of death thing I've been saddled with, and I just... You need to leave."

Bucky nods. "Fine." His voice is husky. He gathers himself to go.

"I have safe houses," Tony says. "Pepper will give you a list, if you ever need a place.... Call every once in awhile. We'll do Thanksgiving."

Bucky nods. It's better than he had hoped. So much more than what he deserved.

"Tony," he says. His son looks at him. "Whatever happens next... You've done good for yourself, kid. I'm proud."

He's almost out the door before he hears Tony's quiet reply. "Thanks, Dad."

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## Epilogue

Steve Rogers looks around his Brooklyn apartment, the bare walls, the furniture that seems right from a distance, but has an odd, pre-aged feel up close. He gets the feeling half a dozen Shield agents worked to make everything 1940's period-authentic, which was both thoughtful and terribly depressing.

Someone placed an old photo on his nightstand. It's a black and white of the Commandos and Howard, posing for a camera. Jacques, Dum-Dum, Gabe, Morita, and all the rest. Steve's in front, smiling brightly: the commander that should have lead them all to the end.

Steve picks it up, and his thumb touches the glass over one face. Bucky.

He wonders what Bucky would think about the world of the future. He'd probably have a joke or three about how people dressed -- or didn't dress in some cases. He'd say just the right thing to make Steve feel better.

He *knows* Bucky would want him to carry on. But all he can see when he closes his eyes is the terror on Bucky's face as he fell into the canyon. It's been seventy years for everyone else, but only a couple weeks for him.

And to think, if they were both born in this day and age, they could have stepped out together in the open. Steve could have even married him.

The shrinks at Shield tried to get him to talk about all he lost, but he didn't want to. The wounds were too raw. He made noises about losing soldiers, feeling like he was betraying Bucky's memory.

There's a soft knock at the door.

For a moment, Steve considers being rude and not answering. The pretty nurse who lives next door has already introduced herself, and right now he's not sure he can scrape up politeness if she comes with a home-warming gift.

The knock comes again, and Steve sighs, supposing part of getting on with life is being neighborly.

Setting the picture frame aside, Steve wipes any hint of moisture from his eyes away with the side of his palm and stands up.

It's not the pretty nurse. For a stunned second he thinks 'Howard?' but that's not right, either. The man is about Howard's age as Steve knew him, about his height and build, with the same dark hair, but a different cut to his jaw. And of course it couldn't be Howard -- Steve had read up on the files. Howard and his wife died a couple decades back. This must be his semi-mysterious son.

Howard's son looks him up and down, and a smirk pulls at the corner of his mouth that -- weirdly - - reminds Steve of Bucky. "Wow," the man says, without introducing himself. "Guess they did freeze at the peak of freshness."

"Uh, what?" Steve asks, and blames his confusion for stepping back enough to allow the man to bluster in.

"Anthony Stark," he says, stepping past Steve and looking around the room with an assessing air. "But you can call me Tony. History books tell me you knew my old man."

"Uh," Steve says again, but he'd read that Tony was a young child when Howard died -- he'd want to know about him from a friend -- but Steve is suddenly very weary, too sad to talk past-tense about someone he'd said goodbye to just a couple weeks ago. "Look, Mr. Stark, it's a little late--"

The man has turned away from him, infuriatingly, typing on a little device Steve's been told are telephones nowadays.

"Look--" Steve begins again, and the man turns and shows Steve the screen.

THIS ROOM IS MICROPHONED. KEEP TALKING.

Steve's eyes flick to Stark's again. The bluster is gone. Stark's dark eyes are serious, and something in Steve hardens.

"I... guess," he says, trying to keep it casual and knows he's failing. He's always been a terrible, terrible actor. "What would you like to know?"

"Only the good stuff, you can keep all your French brothel stories to yourself, Cap. Ohhh. Is this period-authentic?" Stark turns to a radio set in the corner and doesn't wait for Steve to answer. "No, the make stamp says nineteen fifty-five. Seriously? Well I guess it'll be futuristic to you." Then he flips the dial and turns on the knob. A transmission starts up -- clearer than Steve ever remembered hearing from his own radios. Some sort of sports program.

Stark grins and turns the volume almost painfully high.

"That'll jam them," he says, coming closer to Steve and speaking sotto-voice, "But someone will be up here to 'check in on you' before long." He makes finger quotes around the words, showing his sarcasm. "Anyone introduce themselves yet?"

"Just my neighbor."

Stark taps a couple things on the screen again. It looks more like floating glass than the devices he's seen the Shield agents use. "Look a little like this?" He turns the screen, and the pretty nurse is there again, her face displayed under a Shield profile. Sharon Carter.

The expression on Steve's face probably says it all. Stark nods and looks even grimmer. All the bluster gone. It was as good as a mask. "There's a few things about the future you need to know, Cap, and I can't discuss any of them here. Come with me."

Steve hesitates. What if this is a trap?

Stark rolls his eyes. "Don't tell me they've given you the stranger danger speech? Look at me," he holds out his arms, "you could take me apart limb-by-limb."

Not if Stark has futuristic weapons, but the thought of sitting alone in an apartment where he might

be listened in on was not appealing.

Steve nods, and Stark makes his quick way out the door.

They take the stairwell, apparently not trusting the elevator. There's a limousine waiting outside. Steve tries not to boggle as Stark crawls in.

"Hit it, Happy," Stark says as soon as the door closes.

But they only roll a few blocks before the driver pulls into an alleyway.

Stark flashes Steve another brazen smile that would have looked the same on Bucky's face. He gestures to the door. "On the count of three."

Steve nods, and on three they open the doors and exit out of the still moving car. Steve has to jog to keep his feet, and Stark makes it despite the fancy get-up.

Stark gestures and they duck into a shadow.

"Watch," Stark says quietly, peeping around the corner to the street. Steve does the same, and sure enough two unmarked cars pull into view, following the still driving limousine.

Stark had been followed.

Stark has evidently planned for this. There is a stash of clothes in Steve's size, hidden in a mostly dry corner. He changes and pulls a ball cap over his head for good measure.

Then Stark picks up Steve's discarded Shield issued jacket and tears one of the seams. There are... wires on the inside, following the stitching. Stark gives Steve a direct look.

"I take it that's not normal?" Steve asks.

"No, you were being traced. C'mon."

They walk out the alley on the other side, and down to the closest subway stop.

At this time of night the subway car is empty, except for a young mother with a baby sitting at the end. Stark takes a seat, looking not out of place despite the fact he is probably richer than Rockefeller.

"So," he says casually, resting an arm along the back of the seat. "Some important things I've been asked to explain to you before we arrive--"

"Where are we going?" Steve asks, cutting him off.

"A safe house," he replies. "I have a few of them scattered here and there in the city and more scattered through the world -- old habit from childhood." He fixes Steve with a direct stare.

"What'd they tell you about how Howard Stark died?"

"It was a car accident?" he asks because he's suddenly not sure.

"He and his wife were assassinated," Stark says, and it's odd to hear him speak so distantly of his parents.

"Assassinated? Who would--I--jeez, I'm sorry to hear that," Steve says, thinking of how traumatic that must have been on a kid. But Stark shrugs.



"I don't remember it -- don't remember them. Personally, I consider it a small mercy. But the important thing is this," he leans forward. "I've been doing a little research over the last couple years, and I found out it happened because Howard was unraveling some very big secrets several interested parties wanted to keep hush-hush."

"You're saying Howard was killed to keep him silent?"

Tony nods. "The man who did it was code-named: Winter Soldier. He was under mind-control of a group called Hydra. Know them?"

A zing shoots down Steve's spine. "Yes, but...The Red Skull is dead."

Now Stark rolls his eyes. "Yeah, but you know what they say. Cut off one head--"

"How do I know any of this is true?" Steve demands, looking around. "Maybe there's no one following you. Maybe they put wires in all jackets nowadays."

"A little far -fetched, right?" Stark asks, not concerned. "We're going to speak to the Winter Soldier -- he'll be able to collaborate my story. He ended up raising me, by the way."

"What?" Steve asks, shocked, wondering if Stark is pulling his leg.

Stark shrugs. "Apparently he had, well, not a change of heart, but managed to snap out of some of the brainwashing Hydra had him under before he killed me, too." He looks at Steve and smirks as if he's in on a joke. "I think you'll trust him -- you'll have to. I have evidence that points to the fact Shield has also been compromised. You're in danger, Cap."

Steve privately thought he would have to see about that, himself. It's a wild story. But Stark says no more on the matter until the subway stops.

They exit in a nice part of town. Upper East side, which Steve had not visited much when he lived in Brooklyn. It's better being here, where things are unfamiliar. Makes him wonder if he made a mistake trying to settle back in his old neighborhood.

Stark leads him to a fancy building, then turns to Steve in the elevator. "I know he killed Howard -- but that's my problem, not yours. He's saved my life a half-dozen times since then, and raised me the best he could. Don't be too hard on him."

Steve doesn't know what to say, doesn't know if he has it in himself to face down the murderer of one of his friends and do nothing. He tries to be a good man, not a saint.

The elevator dings open, and they step directly into the living room. There's a young woman sitting on a couch nearby, and a man in casual slacks. They both stand as Steve walks off the elevator. And... the world stops.

"Bucky?" he breathes.

His hair is longer, pulled back into a ponytail, and there's something wrong with his left arm that Steve is too shocked to focus on. But Bucky's alive. He's *alive*.

Bucky smiles and gives a half-shrug. "Hey Stevie."

End.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Critique always welcome. :)

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